

# Yak, elk and locusts – oh my!

• AMY SPIRO

So, what's for dinner? If the answer to that question is elk, sheep testicles, fried locusts or water buffalo, then you're probably dining at the house of either Ari Zivotofsky or Ari Greenspan.

The two Aris, who call themselves halachic adventurers, have dedicated the past two decades of their lives to hunting down the tradition and laws behind a variety of kosher foods that are very rarely eaten in the religious community today. The pair met as 18-year-old students at the Har Etzion Yeshiva, where they both expressed an interest in studying *shechita*, or ritual slaughter. Together they have traveled the globe delving into research of Jewish history and law.

In just the past few years, Greenspan tells *The Jerusalem Post*, he has been to "Ethiopia, Kenya – where we *shecht-ed* [slaughtered] 1,500 birds and 40 animals for Jewish communities – Uganda, Bulgaria and Uzbekistan."

In the past, he says, they have been to Djibouti, Eritrea, Dubai and Bahrain.

"It's all part of researching ancient Jewish communities," says Greenspan, who works as a dentist in Jerusalem. In addition to their explorations, the team often goes to countries to slaughter animals for the kosher community, be involved in Jewish conversions of locals, give lectures and uncover ancient Jewish traditions and artifacts.

In the past, every Jewish community had its own *shochet*, or ritual slaughterer. Today, most people buy packaged meat from supermarkets, so only the most commonly eaten animals are available. Because of this, the halachic duo are worried that the *mesora*, or tradition, dictating how to slaughter the animals properly will die out.

Armed with all their decades of knowledge, the two men have hosted five "mesora" dinners over the past decade, in Jerusalem, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. The dinners consisted of multiple courses – including dishes containing partridge, swordfish, yak, cow udder, guinea fowl and other lesser-known kosher animals – interspersed with lectures about Jewish law and kashrut.

"We serve everything to teach something," says Greenspan. "We don't serve anything just because it's something crazy."

The most recent dinner they hosted was in Chicago in 2011, and though they get constant requests to hold more of them, they have been too busy with their other adventures so far.

"All the time people ask [when the next dinner will be]," says Zivotofsky, a lecturer in cognitive science at Bar-Ilan University, "but they are a huge amount of work, so we don't do them too often."

One thing that has been occupying their time is their quest to slaughter a giraffe for kosher consumption. Greenspan says he and Zivotofsky have



ARI GREENSPAN (left) and Ari Zivotofsky slaughter birds for the Jewish community in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. (Menachem Kucher)

been in contact with people in Kenya and Uganda to be able to purchase a giraffe, which he says is "not endangered in any way, nor is it a protected species."

Most people in the Jewish community believe that giraffe is kosher, he explains, but they think that since we don't know where on the neck to slaughter it, it can't be eaten. That, he says, is a misconception, and "anybody who knows anything about shechita knows that technically you can shecht a giraffe."

But the pair is still on a hunt to find one they can slaughter in a kosher manner.

"They're not endangered, but I guess there's not a big market for them," says Zivotofsky. "And the other issue is... we need to have it awake and restrained, and we want to do just one – if we were setting up a production, it might be easier," he says, adding they have received price quotes from \$3,500 to \$20,000.

"It's not about sampling a giraffe," says Greenspan of their quest.

"We want to demonstrate that it really is kosher," says Zivotofsky, "just to set the record straight, and that's all."

AT THEIR mesora dinners in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, they worked with local kosher organizations that dictated which animals they would or would not allow. When they worked with the Orthodox Union, or

OU, it didn't want to serve pheasant, since some halachic authorities say there is no tradition of the bird being kosher. When they hosted a dinner with the Chicago Rabbinical Council, or CRC, they were asked not to serve locusts, since there were concerns that only Sephardim, but not Ashkenazim, could eat them.

In Israel, Zivotofsky says, kashrut is "unfortunately a lot of politics." But about 10 years ago, the two Aris approached the chief rabbi about certifying water buffalo as kosher.

"We collected information and then presented it to the chief rabbi, put him in contact with people he could approach," says Zivotofsky. "We took him on a field trip to go investigate the water buffalo at Moshav Bitzaron. Ari Greenspan X-rayed a water buffalo head because he wanted to see something about the teeth, then we left it in his hands to make the decision" – which was ultimately to allow it.

Though Greenspan has traveled the globe as a halachic adventurer, there are "two places I'd like to go the most," he says, that are not in any future travel plans: Iran and Yemen.

"Ari and I had planned to go to Yemen. Even though both the American Embassy and their security staff, as well as Israeli security, had told us it's very dangerous, you're not going, we were still planning on going," he recalls.

"We spoke to somebody there who told us you can go to such-and-such town and find someone by the name of Moshe Nahari and say, 'Moshe, we'd like to come for you for Shabbat,' and you can stay with him," he continues. "We really planned on going. We started organizing it, and suddenly we saw that a grenade was thrown into someone's house and Moshe Nahari was killed. That made us say, it's not the right time to go to Yemen."

Zivotofsky also has a wish list of communities that he won't be seeing any time soon.

"I always talked about how wonderful it would be to go to Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq – all of those countries had ancient, active, strong Jewish communities," he says. "It would have been phenomenal to go there."

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